‘Four’s a crowd’? Making sense of neoliberalism, ethical stress, moral courage and resilience

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Abstract

This paper will build on findings from a study on ‘ethical stress’ (experienced when social workers cannot base their practice on their values) conducted with criminal justice social workers in Scotland (Fenton, 2015). The study demonstrated that social workers experienced more ethical stress the more risk averse they perceived their agencies to be. However, the study also found that social workers perceived some ethical issues as merely practical ones and, thus, did not find them ethically unsettling. Making the link between ethical stress and moral courage, with the former acting as an impetus to action, this paper will grapple with the concern that neglect of the moral content of actions, and internalisation of the neoliberal narrative, can lead to a collusion with managerial, bureaucratic and technical practice that belies the reality of service users lives. This paper will explore the need for social work education to explicitly acknowledge and *encourage* the identification of ethical stress and its utility as a catalyst for moral action (Fenton, 2016), contrary to some current thinking around resilience (Garrett, 2016) and as an amelioration of potentially oppressive, neoliberal hegemonic practice.

Introduction

Spolander et al (2015) argue that social workers need to understand macro-economics, whilst acknowledging that most people do not come into social work to learn about that topic:

> For many social workers, political economics is the antithesis of why they entered the profession; many do not appreciate its fundamental importance in understanding social welfare policy development, its impacts on day-to-day practice such as fragmentation of professional social work…and resulting implications for resistance to neoliberal policy implementation (Spolander et al, 2015, 2).

Contemporary political economics, essentially the economic and policy choices that successive governments have made since the late 1970s, reflect the neoliberal ideology that has been the political context for the UK and other western democracies for the last 40 years. Those neoliberal economic policies have resulted in the redistribution of wealth upwards, austerity and benefit cuts in respect of the poorest in society, tax breaks for corporations and the very wealthy, deregulation of businesses in a way that maximises profit, devastating cuts to public services and to welfare agencies, and the privatisation of services (many such as health and care which used to be outwith the reach of the market) so that they are run for profit, in-keeping with the priorities of a free -market economy (Garrett, 2010). These economic, neoliberal policy choices have made the poor in the country much poorer, as manifest in the rise of foodbanks and

homelessness and the emergence of ‘the working poor’ (JRF, 2016). Recent reports have further highlighted the devastating effects of neoliberal policy, including significant rises in inequality (BBC, 2019a) and poverty created by the removal of the welfare safety net and its replacement with "a harsh and uncaring ethos" (BBC, 2019b, np).

The ideology of neoliberalism could not, of course, have gained the public support it did without the ‘common sense’ narrative of personal responsibility that characterises it. The neoliberal concept of invidualism - concentrating only on individual level explanations for social problems and individual level credit or blame for success or failure, as if actions exist in a neutral rather than highly unequal context, has become very much taken for granted (Monbiot, 2016). From the introduction of neoliberalism in the late 70s until the present day, Margaret Thatcher’s proclamation that poverty was a result of ‘hard fundamental character-personality defect’ (Catholic Herald, 1978, n.p.) has increasingly gained traction. Grasso et al (2017) demonstrate via British Attitudinal Survey data that the generation after Generation X (often known as ‘millennials’ (Twenge, 2018)) are the most ‘right-wing authoritarian’ of any previous generation, including having negative attitudes to welfare provision and unemployed people and supporting harsher punishments for crime. The authors had hypothesised this would be the case because whilst Thatcher’s government promoted neoliberal economic policy, it was still contested and debated; whilst under the governments of Blair and Brown it was accepted and internalised as the unquestioned, ‘common sense’ ideology (Grasso et al. 2017). The market had triumphed and this was demonstrated in hardening public attitudes to poor and unemployed people (JRF, 2014). These findings, although quite stark, focus on a limited set of questions which were chosen by Grasso et al to measure

right-wing economic and authoritarian attitudes to ‘undeserving’ populations (such as unemployed people and people who had committed crime), and as such, do not illuminate the complete attitudinal picture.

Twenge (2018), writing about the US younger generation, and the UK Social Attitudes Survey (NatCen, 2017), for example, demonstrate that the post-millennial generation are more tolerant and supportive of diversity than all previous generations, and there is evidence to show that younger voters favoured Labour in the 2017 general election, although this was more keenly demonstrated among middle-class voters (The Guardian, 2017). This complex picture suggests that ‘traditional’ left and right ideologies perhaps have less purchase than they might have done in the past. Federico and Malka (2018), for example, found that dispositions leading to political orientations were contingent upon certain factors such as how well-informed a person was about political matters. Those who were well informed tended to adhere to a set of traditional left or right wing ideas as they had ‘learned’ that sets of ideas hang together in a coherent ideology. Those who were less politically engaged had more disparate views and so, for example, might believe in left wing economic redistribution alongside social conservatism. It might be that this phenomenon is playing out in the research considered above, so that traditionally left wing socially liberal views (for example, promotion of diversity) can exist alongside economically right wing views and support for more punitive measures towards those who break the law.

Notwithstanding the bigger, complex picture of individual voting patterns, Grasso et al’s (2017) study does point to a pattern of punitive and authoritarian attitudes amongst younger people to ‘undeserving’ societal groups which suggests that the neoliberal

doctrine of individualism or ‘moralising self-sufficiency’ (Marston, 2013, 132), has been significantly internalised by the younger generation. Such beliefs exacerbate the oppression that neoliberal economic policy already brings to poor people’s lives: ‘For instance, aligning responsibility for poverty to an individual level colludes with and supports macro-level policy that locates the problem at an individual level rather than recognises structural causes’ (Spolander et al, 2015, 12). Hence the suggestion that social workers need to critically understand the neoliberal, economic context of people’s lives and, thus, of social work practice in order that they avoid oppressive, punitive practice that echoes the neoliberal idea that people are solely responsible for their problems. The International Federation of Social Work, for example, states that ‘social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing’ (IFSW, 2014, n.p.). In other words, social work explicitly recognises that context and structure has an effect on people’s ‘life challenges and wellbeing.’ This tenet of social work should not be controversial.

With the developments outlined above as the backdrop, this paper will consider the analysis of ethical stress within a neoliberal context and the utility of that for a morally courageous form of social work that might have some purchase in encouraging social workers to work in solidarity with service users.

Neoliberalism in social work

There appears to be a dislocation of social work practice from a recognition or understanding of its wider, neoliberal context that can be detected at various points

throughout a practitioner's social work journey. At the very beginning of social work education, for example, Sheedy (2013) notes:

> A number of social work students commence their studies claiming no knowledge of politics, or more worryingly, no interest in politics. The danger of such an approach is that one focuses on "helping people" to the exclusion of consideration of the broader contexts within which this vocational task is carried out (Sheedy, 2013, 6).

A study by Fenton (2019), based on Grasso et al's (2017) study mentioned previously, also found that younger students aged 23 and under at the very start of their social work programmes had right-wing attitudes economically, and punitive attitudes in terms of authoritarianism which were exactly in keeping with Levitas's (2015, 14) conception of 'the dual character of the new right'; that is, reduced state contribution for welfare and strengthened law and order state intervention. Where the student group was more attitudinally liberal, they were still significantly more right-wing authoritarian than their older peers. Gilligan (2007) similarly found that a certain age group of entrants to social work programmes, termed by the author as 'Thatcher's children' were significantly more likely to attribute causes of social problems to individuals rather than to society.

Further research with students has demonstrated that during social work education, students struggle to apply notions of social justice (Woodward and Mackay, 2012), struggle to consider social conditions or structural influences on the lives of service users (Lafrance, Gray and Herbert, 2004) and often offer glib and simplistic understandings of service users' problems (Norstrand, 2017). Fazzi (2016) also found that at the end of social work education, students offered less imaginative solutions to

problems, having internalised the codified and managerial responses to issues brought by service users.

Grant et al (2017) in a large scale study of newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) found that respondents were not confident about applying values of social justice and, indeed, ‘poverty’ does not feature at all in the report. NQSWs were compassionate and empathetic, but individual-level values concerned with interpersonal relationships quite clearly dominated. Sheppard et al (2018), in a study of newly qualified social workers from twelve social work programmes, found that the students scored significantly lower than a UK normative sample on tests of critical thinking ability and assertiveness. Although they scored more highly on compassion, insight and altruism, which are, again, individual-level attributes concerned with how we treat each other on a person-to-person level, it may be inferred that the critical thinking ability required to understand and link socio-political context to individual level situations, was limited. Also limited was the assertiveness required for advocacy and challenge or resistance to neoliberal hegemonic oppressive practices.

Finally, students graduate and often end up in agencies where underpinning neoliberal assumptions form the accepted ‘common sense.’ For example, Rogowski (2015) suggests that in child protection, social work has become less focused on helping families with social problems and more concerned with assessing risk and changing the behaviour of the parents. In other words, the neoliberal individualisation of problems has become the practice framework. Featherstone et al (2012) also suggest that, in this context, poor parenting is understood to be improved by parents learning the correct parental techniques rather than by receiving relationship-based help from a social

worker to improve material conditions and deal with problems. Parenting viewed in this way can then lead to the ubiquitous referral to the dreaded ‘parenting class.’ Parents in the child protection system have reported the consequences of this type of social work practice; of being treated as ‘less than human’, for example (Smithson and Gibson, 2017, p.572). In the area of youth offending, Trotter, Evans and Baidawi (2017) witnessed good practice with service users, but also saw forceful and critical practice which led to service user disengagement. Child protection and youth offending, of course, are two areas of social work practice where the neoliberal individualistic narrative holds fast – people should simply be punished or coerced into behaving better. The ‘undeserving’ service user is most easily subjected to those simple, blaming attitudes (Fenton, 2019). As Storr (2017, 330) says:

> Individualism makes us a blameful people… we act in ignorance of the impossibly complex nature of why anybody behaves as they do. Of the addicts, the homeless, the violent, the obese, of those whose circumstances lead them into the utter darkness of prison, we’re quick to condemn and slow to forgive.

From the preceding account, then, it appears that neoliberal hegemony, with its self-sufficiency ‘common sense’ ideology (Marston, 2013), permeates the professional trajectories of social workers – from beginning student to student to graduand and, finally, to worker.

Ethical Stress

The second element under investigation in the relationship between neoliberalism, ethical stress, moral courage and resilience, is ‘ethical stress’; the discomfort and stress generated when social workers are thwarted in their attempts to base their practice on social work values (Fenton, 2015). The concept has also been referred to as ‘moral distress’ which is experienced when someone ‘identifies a preferred moral action, which the actor views as right, but is blocked by factors outside of the self’ (Weinberg, 2016, 17). Academic literature from the field of nursing also refers to ‘moral distress’ when, once again, institutional and procedural restrictions have frustrated nurses’ attempts to do what they believe is the right thing (for example, Jameton, 1984; Kalvemark et al, 2004).

Much has been written in the social work academic literature over recent years about how the managerial nature of contemporary social work has led to disillusioned and unhappy social workers who find it difficult to enact their values (see, for example, Jones, 2001; Preston-Shoot, 2003; and Chenot, Benton and Kim, 2009). Criminal justice social workers in a research study reported levels of ethical stress which were significantly correlated with how risk averse they perceived their agencies to be (Fenton, 2015). Respondents felt that when they were not allowed latitude in decision making due to risk controls, they experienced ethical stress as a result of not being able to do what they felt was the right thing. This is congruent with, for example, Kowalski et al. (2010) who found that greater ‘latitude in decision making’ led to less experience of emotional exhaustion for professionals working with people with disabilities. According to Webb (2006), however, social work is afraid of complex risk decisions and so is subject to managerial processes designed to demonstrate that social workers have

‘done things right’ rather than ‘done the right things’ (Munro, 2011, 6). This approach means that, in the event of something going wrong, agencies can show that the social workers involved followed the correct procedure. Any moral or ethical dilemmas in this managerial context, are airbrushed out of the picture. As stated, this type of risk averse, managerial culture has been demonstrated to have deleterious effects on workers who feel they cannot practice in the value based way they want to. Some comments from Fenton (2015) and Fenton and Kelly (2017), articles which were based on the same large scale study of criminal justice social workers in Scotland, were as follows:

> *Pressure is on to risk assess everyone, at the expense of getting to know, and work with, clients* (Fenton, 2015, 10).

And

> *There is a major emphasis on risk assessments and we constantly hear about defensible decisions* (Fenton, 2015, 9).

And

> *Risk is king and needs to take a back seat!* (Fenton and Kelly, 2017, 465)

These statements from social workers augment the study’s quantitative finding of a statistically significant relationship between ethical stress and perception of risk aversion within agencies (Fenton, 2015). Quite clearly, some staff felt constrained and felt unable to practice in line with their values when agencies were underpinned by risk averse assessments and procedures.

In contrast to the above, however, some respondents demonstrated views very in-keeping with the neoliberal character of certain agencies, and made comments

congruent with the internalisation of the neoliberal hegemony as described in the introduction:

> *The stress in the job is more about resistant clients and managing the risk they pose* (Fenton and Kelly, 2017, 469)

And

> *This (offending) is through their choice* (ibid)

The neoliberal framing of social problems (in this case crime) as solely an individual 'choice', excluding socio-political influences, may be unlikely to result in ethical stress for these workers because a logical response to a rational behavioural 'choice' is instruction/coercion to facilitate behavioural change. This approach is compatible with neoliberal practice and agencies where:

> *Engagement with services users is viewed very disdainfully* (ibid).

And

> *I don't think within the team I work that there is a sense that humanising what we do is relevant* (ibid).

So, at this point it is clear that most workers felt some sort of ethical stress due to risk aversion (hence the causal relationship, Fenton, 2015), but that there were some who did not, possibly due to the neoliberal congruent values they possessed, demonstrated in the belief that the 'offender' is solely responsible for choosing to commit crime and that the individual/behavioural level of understanding is the only one required (Fenton and Kelly, 2017).

If ethical stress is experienced as a result of values conflicting with neoliberal/managerial agencies where little attention is given to the impact of structural factors on human behaviour and experience, then the suggestion that some social workers do not experience ethical stress, perhaps due to neoliberal-congruent values, is important for social work and social work education. Essentially, the experience of ethical stress demonstrates that the social worker can see beyond the individualisation of social problems and understands that contextual factors, such as poverty, matter.

Another finding from the same study is that there was no significant relationship between how the agency worked with service users and ethical stress (Fenton, 2015). The author had hypothesised that when welfare work, helping and responding to service users in a value-based way was thwarted due to an agency approach that was heavily managerial in the types of work undertaken (such as manualised work, procedural monitoring and mandatory group work), social workers would experience ethical stress. However, this was not the case, and the finding was illuminated by comments made:

> *The thing stopping me from doing 'welfare' work is lack of time and resources rather than a mandate not to do this* (Fenton, 2015, 12).

Workers accepted that welfare work, or helping service users (in line with values) could be done only if time allowed, and work prioritised by the agency had to take precedence. Respondents, in the main, did not consider this an ethical problem, but merely a practical one and, thus, it did not result in ethical stress. The rules were unquestioningly accepted by most. 'Moral meaningfulness' encapsulates the ability to see ethical meaning in situations and to recognise that a situation has a moral dimension (May, Luth and Shwoerer, 2014). If a social worker does not perceive a

moral dimension to what they can and cannot do within their social work practice, then ethical stress will not result from restrictions as the issue will be understood as practical, rather than ethical. Social workers might indeed still feel compassion for the people they are working with, but without a moral understanding of the situation, managerial and procedural practice might well triumph without any stirring of conscience or any ethical stress.

Bauman (2000, 8) talks about the ‘ethical impulse’ of social work, and how it is at odds with a neoliberal framing of the ‘underclass’: ‘the poverty-stricken people, single mothers, school-dropouts, drug addicts, and criminals on parole.’ He describes these groups as a ‘burden on society’ (ibid) when viewed through the lens of economic neoliberalism and suggests that, from such an angle, it makes no sense to care about them. This supports the idea that if social workers view the people they are working with, especially the ‘undeserving’ ones, through a neoliberal lens, then they will feel little ethical stress when those people are subject to individualistic, self-sufficiency responses. Likewise, even when there is compassion and a desire to help, this will be a practical individual-level type of helping, uncoupled from an understanding of social context (Sheedy, 2013). Both of these responses might well make the experience of ethical stress both cognitively and emotionally out of reach.

Moral Courage

Moral courage refers to the virtue of having ‘the strength to do what is right in the face of opposition’ (Barsky, 2009, n.p.). Barsky also asks, in terms of social work education:

> What knowledge and information should we provide, and what types of learning experiences should be used to promote moral courage? How can we ensure that social workers not only know what is the right thing to do, but that they have the moral strength to put that knowledge into action?'

And Fine and Teram (2012, 1313), who undertook a study in Canada to ascertain what led to workers demonstrating moral courage and taking action quote one worker as follows:

> I think it's very important to know what you consider to be right and very important to speak up when you think something is not right and to explore it and to be willing to sort of be one of the few voices and not just go with the flow because everyone else is comfortable with it.

So, both of these examples talk about 'knowing' what the right thing is as a first step to taking morally courageous action, or doing 'the right thing.' These examples are also in contrast to simply following procedures and 'doing things right' in terms of carrying out tasks and processes (Munro, 2011). In essence, Fine and Teram found that all respondents who could take ethical action had 'a very robust sense of knowing what ought to be done'. That is not to say that taking ethical action was painless or without anxiety, but the researchers found that workers almost felt there was no alternative. The 'right thing' and 'what ought to be done' are clearly ethical judgements and these social workers were perceiving their work as having moral meaning. This meant that they were open to experiencing ethical stress when the 'right thing' was thwarted. They then felt

that living with said ethical stress was almost intolerable and ethical action was a necessity.

Stanford (2011, 1520) found that the personal moral code of a social worker, including compassion, empathy and social justice understanding, was the deciding factor in whether they would ‘control and dismiss’ or ‘protect and advocate’ when working with service users. To have a ‘social justice understanding’ means, again, that a social worker must see a moral dimension to the problem – it needs to strike them as an ethical matter if they cannot help the family who needs it due to time restrictions, an agency culture that inhibits engagement, or wider welfare and service cuts. Not understanding matters as ethical will, again, promote ‘controlling and dismissing’ responses. Also, a personal moral code based on an internalisation of individualism and self-sufficiency tenets will exacerbate the likelihood of those responses and lead to social work interactions such as those experienced by parents in the Smithson and Gibson (2017) study.

Quinlan (2016) undertook an analysis of character requirements in degree courses, based on the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) benchmark statements, and found that courage in social work was implicit in the requirements, although not named. So, for example, standing up to discrimination and challenging social justice are highlighted, all of which would require courage. She states, ‘the statement paints a picture of social workers negotiating interpersonal and intrapersonal minefields in the service of ideals’ (Quinlan, 2016, 1046). It is recognised, therefore, that we do ask quite a lot of our students and social workers in terms of courage, but it is equally clear that this is a requirement.

So, moral courage is required to take action, including advocacy, speaking up in meetings, arguing for a course of action, arguing to *not* follow agency procedures if your professional opinion is that something else is required (for example, having the courage to *not* refer to the dreaded parenting class (Featherstone et al, 2012). These are perhaps not the 'minefield' actions of Quninlan's description, but they do take courage and assertiveness. Given that Sheppard et al (2018) found that social work graduands scored more poorly than a UK normative sample on assertiveness measures, the picture is not hopeful. Oliver et al (2017) designed a learning activity around encouraging students to have a difficult conversation, to counteract the tendency of students feeling unable to speak up. Again, this is not a good sign for the continuing development of moral courage within the profession.

Resilience

There is a further development that might add to this already significant 'neoliberalisation' of social work: the concept of resilience. Garrett (2016) critiques resilience theory within social work when it is applied to the circumstances of service users and when it downplays the part structural issues play in a person's well-being or 'success' by framing problems as individualised. He suggests:

> For example, the structurally generated scale of poverty in the USA and the enormous disparities in wealth are not the focus of research interest. Instead, and despite 'growing recognition of the importance of analysing contexts, "resilience" research remains principally preoccupied with the individual and assumes the individualized nature of adaptation' (Bottrell, 2009, 336). This criticism is related to the charge that it 'can depoliticise efforts such as poverty reduction and emphasise self-help in line with a neo-conservative agenda

> instead of stimulating state responsibility' (Mohaupt, 2009, 67). (Garrett, 2016, 1918)

The promotion of self-help for service-users based on an individualised rather than structural understanding of problems mirrors the emphasis on adaptation and 'coping-with' responses of social workers to neoliberal practice contexts that should be the target of resistance and critique. In other words, in relation to social workers, resilience can be defined as positive adaptation *to* neoliberal, oppressive contexts rather than as positive adaptation *in spite of* neoliberal, oppressive contexts. So, staff programmes about relaxation, time management, mindfulness etc. can supplant or erode resistance behaviour such as increasing advocacy and working *more* in solidarity with the service user. Galpin, Maksymluk and Whiteford (2019) undertook research into the meaning of resilience in social work, by asking practitioners about their understanding of the concept. They found that participants repeatedly referred to the tendency to use the concept of resilience in a way that individualised problems; 'whatever the difficult or unpleasant situation is, it should be borne on an individualised basis' (ibid. np). They also talked about shielding or protecting yourself from harm and 'working hard not to become emotionally involved' (ibid). As suggested by Garrett, therefore, there is evidence to support the notion that the promotion of 'resilience' can disconnect social work practice even further from the emotional content and ethical stress that might trigger moral courage and action. Galpin, Maksymluk and Whiteford (2019), in fact explicitly state this as follows:

> The discourse in relation to resilience and social work practice consistently refers to…the development of an approach to practice that seeks to identify and strengthen individual coping strategies in *isolation from the political and*

*organisational contexts of practice…*the apparent one-dimensional individualised experience of 'resilience' has the potential to *construct oppressive practices, which veils wider issues*' (ibid, emphasis added).

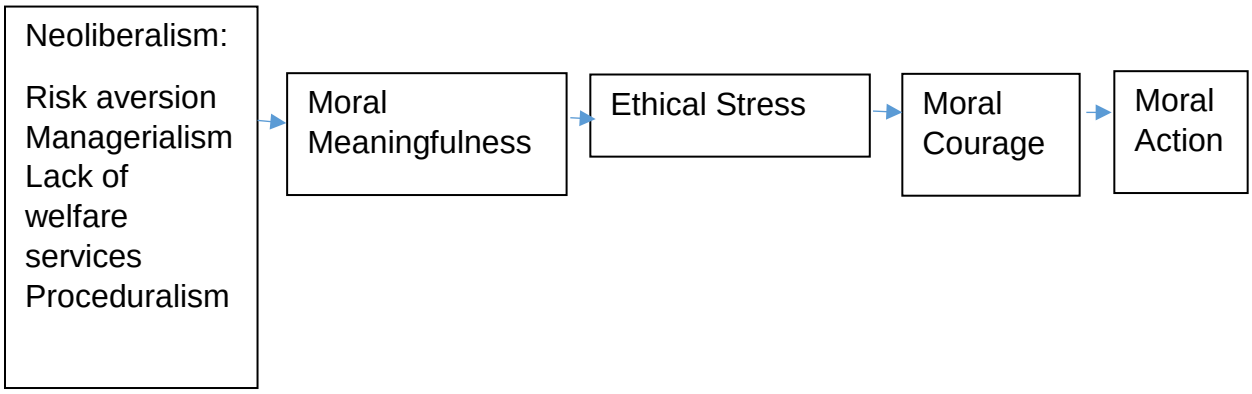
Van Breda (2018) considers Garrett's argument to be too binary, however, and notes that people have agency and that the person-in-environment construct has always been at the root of social work. He does accept, however, that resilience theorising *can* be co-opted by the neoliberal agenda and, given how the cards are stacked against resisting the powerful, hegemonic neoliberal ideology in social work, developments such as 'resilience' can then add to the taken-for-granted individualism narrative. To look beyond this and to question structures and underpinning ideologies of agencies can be eroded in the way that looking beyond individual service users' behaviour to societal structures and ideology is also eroded.

Discussion

It is clear, then, that social workers should experience ethical stress when they feel unsettled and unhappy about being unable to put social work values into action. It seems that social workers will experience ethical stress providing they can see the moral meaning in their actions and that they have not internalised the neoliberal individualisation narrative to such an extent that service users are entirely blamed for their own situations. This is especially important in relation to working with so many service users who are in grim and impoverished circumstances (BBC, 2019b).

As ethical stress may often be a result of the neoliberal features of agencies including risk aversion, lack of autonomy and managerial processes, it stands to reason that the

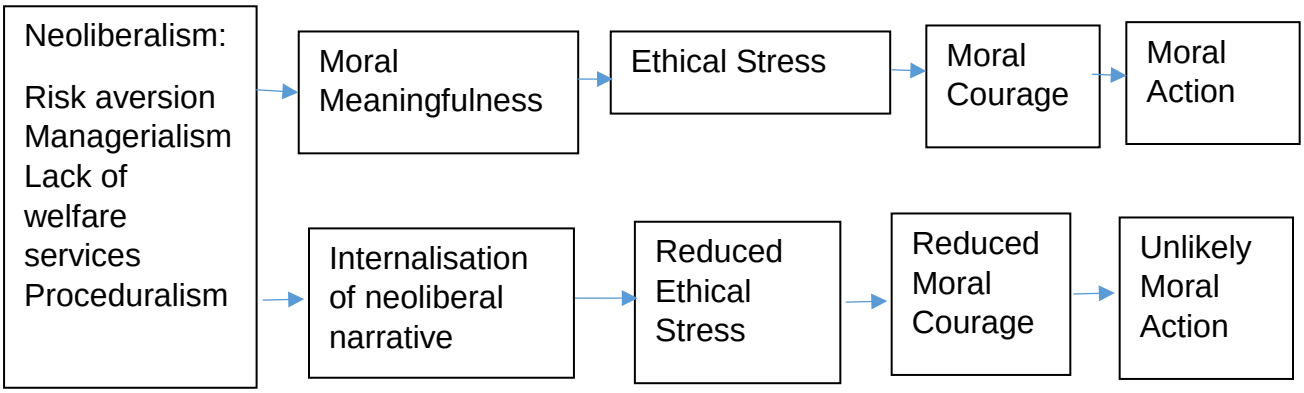
internalisation of the ‘common sense’ of this will inhibit the experience of ethical stress. Responses based on ‘blame’ such as referring to programmes of correctional activity, coercion and even punishment will seem reasonable and outwith critique. In contrast, social workers who can explore and deconstruct neoliberal ideological assumptions and who have a value base congruent with social justice might experience the following:



A salient example of this is given by Weinberg and Banks (2019, 4) who discuss ‘ethical resistance’ which is opposing or resisting something on ethical grounds. In the example, Edward, a social worker, supported a mother with a benefits appeal against the advice of his manager. Edward viewed his manager’s approach as managerial, and felt that she was only interested in quantifiable targets and outcomes: evidence of a neoliberal agency. He felt ethical stress about this to the extent that he ignored the advice, saying: ‘sometimes as practitioners...we have to just do the right thing’ (ibid, 10). Weinberg and

Banks, (2019,12) suggest that, ‘these internal contradictions [ethical stress] can be a breeding ground for resistance’ which endorses the suggestion in this paper that neoliberal restrictions, leading to ethical stress can be a helpful impetus to moral courage and action.

Less positively, however, the literature examined so far would suggest that the above linear relationship between the elements may not always be quite so straightforward. Neoliberalism in fact, as well as being the impetus for this process, might also be a confounding factor as follows:



In essence, if neoliberal social work is experienced through an internalised neoliberal narrative of individualism, limited ethical stress will be experienced (there is no value conflict) and therefore limited moral courage leading to action will be generated. Barak (2019, 9) gives an excellent example of this playing out in the real world of social work in Israel:

> With all the respect I have for anti-oppressive practices, if a woman brings a child into the world and she is not able to care for him appropriately, some thinking must take place, about what can be done. As a clinical social worker I can discuss with her how the circumstances of her life affected her…but there is also a dimension of personal responsibility….Maybe the best thing for this client would be to discuss this [personal responsibility] instead of the structural circumstances of her life that were/are not under her control?

This student was describing her stand point in relation to a 'hard-working impoverished mother who was constantly late from work to pick up her child from…day care, until she was finally reported to social services for neglect' (Barak, 2019, 9). The very neoliberal-congruent narrative articulated by this student seems punitive in the extreme, and yet the author found that it was not atypical in the study group. Had the social work student had a value base less in keeping with neoliberal individualism, she might have felt some outrage that the woman was being referred for neglect due to poverty and her situation as a member of the 'working poor' (JRF, 2016). It seems truly awful that outrage, leading to the moral courage to advocate or help was missing. A focus on personal responsibility might form part of any social work relationship, but not to the extent, exemplified by this example, where a self-sufficiency doctrine has led to a denial of any structural barriers to successful functioning. In opposition to this, ethical stress ought to be encouraged, welcomed, recognised, and acted upon in order that social workers ask the essential critical questions (Fenton and Kelly, 2017).

So, social work education should explicitly encourage the deconstruction of neoliberal assumptions and highlight the real necessity and benefit of allowing social workers to

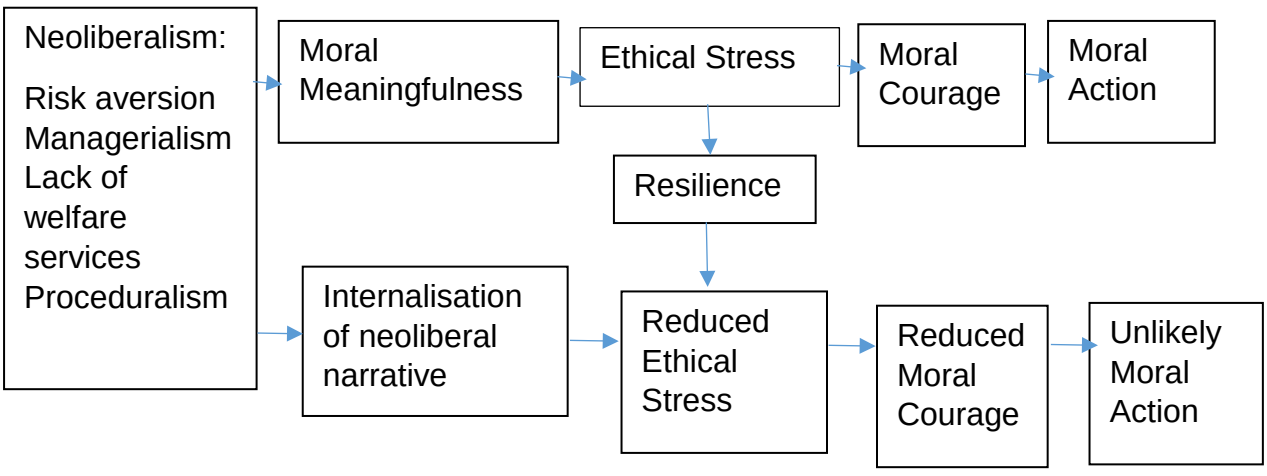
experience, and act on, ethical stress, rather than ‘cope with’ and suppress it in the name of ‘resilience’. This, then, might potentially be a way to educate social workers to resist the neoliberal direction of practice. Explicitly teaching radical social work, for example might be one method of doing this (Fenton, 2014). Although social work education has tended to shirk from explicitly embracing its radical credentials (Funge, 2011), there is justification for resurrecting radical practice in terms of values rooted in structural awareness, and the fact that universities are intended for public good. Quinlan (2016, 1041), for example, asserts that a traditional purpose of the university was ‘character development of its students’ and a consequent contribution to the public good through its students’ character and moral development. This purpose is congruent with the traditional definition of the ‘professions’ as having an altruistic orientation, concerned with public good or public service (Millerson, 1964, cited in Cunningham, 2008; Sullivan, 2005). Once again, however, it would need to be emphasised that, in keeping with social work values, social work ‘public good’ means understanding that poor conditions have detrimental effects on people and that an individual lens is not sufficient to understand human experience.

Finally, asking social workers to demonstrate courage individually in the face of structural and political forces, is asking a great deal. Collective strength may well be necessary here, whether that be via peer support, often seen by social workers as emotionally the most valuable (Ingram, 2015); organisations such as the Social Work Action Network, which explicitly opposes neoliberalism and managerial social work (SWAN, 2017); or via trade union membership.

Conclusion

In conclusion, ethical stress is a hopeful concept for social work and should be embraced by social workers as a marker that something may not be 'right.' It should lead to an examination of that feeling to inspire moral courage to take action and address what does not feel 'right.' So, for example, social workers in a study by Sawyer (2009) felt what might be recognised as ethical stress about a policy that did not allow them to engage with service users who were intoxicated, even although their service users often were, and often were at their most vulnerable then. This explicitly risk-averse, blanket policy caused workers to feel it 'was not right' and engendered moral courage to take action.

It is clear, however, that many things conspire to thwart that process including neoliberal internalisation and the emphasis on workers coping with the reality of practice or 'resilience'. The interplay of these elements might be depicted as:



It is not resilience per se that might lessen the likelihood of a social worker taking action, but the co-opted, neoliberal version of resilience, where everything is understood on the individual level and ethical stress experienced in the face of injustice or oppression is simply something to be coped with and suppressed, rather than recognised and acted upon. Weinberg and Banks (2019, 13) note that social workers are 'educated and socialised to see moral injuries and social injustices,' but have a cautionary note congruent with the messages in this paper: 'If social workers do not make the *links between ethics and politics* and turn to overt ….resistance, then social work's mission as a social justice profession is seriously undermined' (ibid) [emphasis added]. Tying this in with the generational research discussed earlier, Weinberg and Banks' concluding comments are very pertinent, suggesting that social work's positioning as a force for radical and progressive change is an issue 'that each generation needs to re-visit afresh as economic and social contexts for social welfare shift. As spaces for discretion narrow, so scope for resistance also narrows' (ibid). The hope is that in this context, if social workers have well developed social work values and an understanding of radical social work ideas inspired and strengthened by radical social work education (making 'the links between ethics and politics', ibid), then ethical stress will indeed result and moral courage and action will be engendered. This is essential if we are to preserve the heart of social work and its solidarity with people in difficult circumstances.

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